

Creek's debris a threat to Bay

Cleanup a precursor to Earth Day weekend

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SAN MATEO — There's no need to guess at the origin of the litter that flows into San Mateo Creek. It's not hard to recognize.

Thursday morning, a handful of volunteers pulled 15 shopping carts, a bicycle, several car tires and at least 10 traffic cones from the mouth of San Mateo Creek at low tide, half a mile from open Bay waters.

"Some of these things have been here for years — they have barnacles on them," said Wilfredo Bolante, who walks along the shoreline at San Mateo's Ryder Park every morning with his wife, observing the creek and the tides. He volunteered for the pre-Earth Day effort to rid the estuary of its litter, led by park rangers, because he is sick of seeing the upended shopping carts stuck in the mud, revealed every time the tide goes out.

Senior Ranger Gary Esch blamed prankster kids, thoughtless adults and stormy weather for pushing the shopping carts and other items into the creek as it winds its way from Crystal Springs Reservoir into downtown San Mateo. The trash ends up at the base of the creek during heavy rains, he said.



A worker from the county's mosquito abatement program collects garbage near the mouth of San Mateo Creek on Thursday, April 18, 2007. (Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County Times)



James Counts and Angie Nakano from the county's mosquito abatement program unload garbage collected near the mouth of San Mateo Creek on Thursday, April 18, 2007. (Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County

Esch said he had received 20 complaints from park users about the mess in recent months.

"It's been very upsetting. Looking out to San Francisco on a beautiful day, all we see are shopping carts rusting out," he said.

San Mateo Creek is one of many urban waterways across the county that will benefit from a dedicated cleanup effort by caring volunteers this Earth Day weekend. Many, like Pacifica's San Pedro

Creek, become so clogged with plastic bottles and other debris that they pose a flooding hazard. Other areas suffer the effects of human activity but are harder to clean up, such as a number of county beaches contaminated with E. coli.



A tire sits stuck in the silt near the mouth of San Mateo Creek on Thursday, April 18, 2007. (Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County Times)

Officials lay the blame for creek debris squarely on residents. Unlike cities along the East Coast, which have sewer systems that divert street litter out of the waste stream, anything dumped in the street in San Mateo County (and most of the Bay Area) flows directly to the Bay. In spite of thousands of dollars spent on alerting residents to that fact, everything from motor oil to plastic bags still get dumped in the street, according to Dean Peterson, director of the San Mateo County Environmental Health Department.

"It's the disconnect here. A lot of people still think it goes to a sewer and is treated. They don't understand that everything they do affects the environment," Peterson said.

It's each city's responsibility to ensure that litter doesn't end up in local creeks and wash out to the Bay or the ocean, but cities aren't given the funding to install screen devices or other expensive systems that would catch the trash before it reaches the creek, Peterson said.



County worker Ben Rusmisl hauls a shopping cart from the silt near the mouth of San Mateo Creek on Thursday, April 18, 2007. (Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County Times)

Beyond an aggressive street-cleaning policy and the occasional volunteer cleanup day, cities must rely on education to ensure the next generation treats the planet with more care. The county does not monitor the debris flow into waterways, which is "not considered a contaminant," Peterson said. The county only tracks bacterial contamination by E. coli and enterococci at beaches — a public health program that dates back to the 1960s. With help from volunteers with the San Mateo County Surfrider Foundation, officials test the water each week at 56 locations, from Coyote Point to Surfer's Beach in Half Moon Bay.

When the bacteria levels surpass the state limit, the beach is closed to visitors. At least two locations, Venice Beach in Half Moon Bay and Capistrano Beach in Princeton, have been closed permanently. Taken together, the beaches were open 89 percent of the time in 2005-2006, according to Peterson.

Finding the source of the contamination can be tough. Testers know the fecal matter comes from warm-blooded creatures, but that includes everything from seagulls and horses to leaky human septic tanks.

The uncertainty is not cause for inaction, however, said Carolann Towe of the Surfrider Foundation.

"We all have the potential to impact the watershed by the way we behave. Dog droppings that are not picked up get washed into creeks. Diapers are left on the beach," she said.



(Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County Times)

Pacifica resident Lynn Adams is organizing 10 simultaneous beach and neighborhood cleanups Saturday in honor of Earth Day — including one at San Pedro Creek. The event drew 350 volunteers last year. This year, Adams expects 700.

The two most common sources of pollution on the beach are cigarette butts and empty plastic bottles, Adams said. The bottles blow away on recycling day, tip into storm drains and flow to the ocean.

"We're getting litter that comes from San Francisco, and from all the storm drains and waterways," Adams said. "San Pedro Creek has an unbelievable amount of recyclables that get captured. It's basically a log jam."

Ultimately, keeping debris out of the Bay is the responsibility of the Bay Area Regional Water Quality Control Board, which issues a municipal stormwater permit to each county that is supposed to control all pollutants, including trash. The permits regulate industrial chemicals, but allow each city to develop its own plan for removing litter from waterways — essentially a volunteer program with no enforcement.

Board spokesperson Dyan Whyte acknowledged that the policy "hasn't worked." Recently the agency received hundreds of photos of urban creeks across the Bay Area filled with trash, along with dozens of complaints. White said the agency is developing a more specific regionwide permit with provisions for particular kinds of litter. How cities would fund such a project, however, remains to be seen.

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